

National Public Health Week – Preparedness and Public Health Threats

4/1/07

September 11, Hurricane Katrina, May 2003 tornadoes, January 2007 ice storm – in southwest Missouri, we've seen our share of disasters in the last few years, both nationally and locally. The 2001 anthrax attacks, the ever-present threat of bioterrorism, and the looming threat of pandemic influenza force us to examine our level of preparedness. According to a September 2006 poll conducted by Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, only 31% of Americans have an emergency plan.

National Public Health Week, April 2 – 8, focuses on preparedness and public health threats. It encourages communities to look at its most vulnerable populations and the barriers they face to preparing, and then offer tools and resources to overcome those barriers. It encourages every American to choose one activity and take their first step toward becoming better prepared for emergencies.

Mothers with children at home are often too busy with day-to-day activities to prepare for emergencies. Is there enough food in the house to feed everyone for up to 14 days? Is there a first aid kit or prescription medications? Who will pick up children at school or day care if their mother can't get to them? How will family members communicate with one another?

Local food banks that are an essential part of the community may become even more invaluable if local businesses and services are interrupted. Are current facilities structurally safe? How much food can the facility store? Does the food in stock address nutritional needs? Can services be expanded to feed more people if necessary? Is there an alternate delivery plans if transportation is interrupted?

Hourly-wage workers are often without employer-sponsored health plans. They may be significantly impacted if public transportation is interrupted, and they may not be able to find work at all. Is there an alternate plan for getting to work? Will jobs be lost? Is there enough food at home to last 14 days? How long will finances hold out?

School faculty and staff are responsible for each and every one of their students. Where will the students go if the school is locked-down? How will they continue to learn if school is closed for a lengthy period of time? Does the school have sufficient food to care for the students for more than one school day? How will the school communicate with parents?

People with chronic illnesses have special health care needs. They will need to make unique preparations and establishing a support network early to get through a public health emergency. How will the support network communicate with one another? Is there enough food and medicine at home to last

14 days? Are there enough medical supplies at home? Are there alternate locations to receive medical treatment or get medical equipment if normal services are interrupted?

Although the focus of National Public Health Week is on these five groups, it is imperative that each one of us take the first step to prepare for emergencies. Make a plan for your family. Pack an emergency kit. Know where to get credible information on where to go and what to do when disaster strikes.

For more information on emergency preparedness, call the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at (417) 864-1658 or visit www.dhss.mo.gov to learn how you can be "Ready in 3".